COMMENTARY

Interview with a Risk Expert*

Daniel E. Koshland, Jr.

Science: "Dr. Noitall, you are the ultimate authority on all types of risks, a revered figure who has just appeared on national television."

Noitall: "A vast understatement of my true value."

Science: "You must have a large laboratory to uncover so many facts not available to the regulatory agencies."

Noitall: "Facts are no longer created in laboratories; they are created in the media. Any pronouncement of mine repeated in three periodicals, four newspapers, or one television program is considered a fact. My appearance on three talk shows is enough to qualify me as an expert. It is no longer necessary to have a laboratory in my profession."

Science: "Could you give an example of how to avoid risks?"

Noitall: "Stay out of the home. More than 3 million people in the United States were injured in 1987 in home accidents; 90 percent of all automobile accidents occur within 10 miles of home. It is imperative that you stay away from home."

Science: "But I've heard that many accidents occur on highways."

Noitall: "That is true. There is one fatality for every 10 minutes of driving on the highways in the United States. I have developed a rigorous formula that shows that the more time spent on the highway, the greater the chance of an accident. Therefore, I recommend driving 80 miles per hour as a way of reducing the time spent on highways and thus reducing your chance of accident.

Science: "If one stays away from home, is there not an increased chance of infectious diseases?"

Noitall: "One has to give up sexual intercourse entirely. The danger of disease from that source is far greater than from eating an apple, and it should be avoided at all costs."

Science: "Are there other dangers about which the Environmental Protection Agency has failed to advise us?"

Noitall: "Breathing. All breathing generates oxygen radicals, which are the main sources of mutations in DNA, leading to cancer, birth defects, and very peculiarly shaped molecules in the urine. Breathing has been observed 3 minutes before death in 100 percent of all fatalities. We urge everyone to stop breathing until the proper research has been carried out. The EPA has been told about this relation and has failed to act on it, a scandalous display of irresponsibility."

Science: "What about hazards from crime?"

Noitall: "A third of all homicides are committed on intimates, about a third on acquaintances, and about a third on strangers. Hence, it is imperative to avoid intimates, acquaintances, and strangers in order to reduce your risk of homicide significantly."

Science: "Can one ever completely eliminate a given risk?"

Noitall: "One can reduce a risk to essentially zero by adopting what I call 'the riskier alternative strategy.' For example, one could take up hang gliding, as it has been conclusively demonstrated that fewer hang gliders die of passive cigarette smoke than those who never participate in the sport. People who bicycle without a helmet need not worry about a little nuclear reactor nearby. People who have a cocktail before dinner or wine with a meal need never worry about a little trichloroethylene in their drinking water. By the proper choice of alternative strategies, it is possible to reduce one's chance of dying of any particular disorder to any desired level. It has relieved many people of risk anxiety syndrome."

Science: "This seems so sensible; I am surprised people don't follow your advice."

Noitall: "Most ignoramuses are in fact following my formula without knowing it. Millions of people commute 20 miles to work, take airplanes, and choose hopelessly short-lived grandparents and still worry about clean drinking water. These people are secret admirers of peptic ulcers."

Science: "We can't thank you enough for the time you are spending with us, but I have one last question. Do you practice what you preach?"

Noitall: "Sadly, the answer is no. My family on the paternal side has a hereditary weakness whose clinical manifestation is the 'eat, drink, and be merry' psychosis. As a result, all my ancestors on that side of the family have died prematurely, in their early nineties. I doubt whether I will escape the family curse."

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